Eleven Interpretations of Personal Suffering

DANIEL PATRICK FOLEY

ABSTRACT: Suffering is carefully defined in contrast to pain as the psychological experience being investigated. Under consideration, however, is only one's own suffering and not the suffering of other people. Interpretation is identified as the way of perceiving personal suffering. In a nine sentence paragraph the statements describe the perceptual, affective, and action-tending components of an attitude. The implications of assuming a particular attitude are brought to light in summary fashion in another paragraph. Eleven attitudes toward personal suffering are thus described and criticized. An attitude scale of 99 items is constructed from the descriptive statements of these 11 attitudes toward personal suffering. Plans for further research are indicated.

As the title of the paper indicates, the psychological experience under consideration is suffering, not pain. Suffering is the affective aspect of the pain experience, while the cognitive aspect of the pain experience is the sensation of pain. The pain experience has also been broken down into its discriminative dimension (sensation of pain) and into its motivational-affective system (tendency for aversive behavior and suffering). Pain clinics reveal the distinction between pain and suffering both in the adjectives (shooting-terrifying) used to describe the two phenomena and in the methods of treatment (anesthetic-counseling) employed. Instances like being humiliated by an insulting remark or feeling rejected after being fired from one's job clearly show that suffering occurs in the total absence of the sensation of pain. Yet the sensation of pain ordinarily precedes suffering.

The suffering under study is limited to personal suffering, which means only one's own suffering will be investigated. The paper does not look at the suffering of other people. By an interpretation of one's own affective experience of suffering is meant the perception of one's own suffering. This perception of interpretation may involve casting suffering in a meaningful context, organizing it into a gestalt, subsuming it into a comprehensive picture, viewing it from a specific point of view, relating it as an instance of a general

Daniel Patrick Foley, Ph.D., is a Jesuit priest, a clinical psychologist licensed in Ohio, and Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. This article is a revision of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association in New York in August 1987. Address requests for reprints to Dr. Foley, Dept. of Psychology, Xavier University, 3800 Victory Parkway, Cincinnati, Ohio 45207.
principle, integrating it as a part of a story, and locating it in a particular frame of reference.

A particular interpretation of suffering may be formulated in any number of perceptual statements. This perception gives rise to any number of affective reactions, each of which may be embodied in an affective statement. A particular way of perceiving suffering and affective reactions to that interpretation generate, in turn, action-tendencies, and these action-tendencies may be verbalized in any number of action-tending statements. A perception of suffering, an affective reaction to that interpretation, and the action-tendency resulting from the perceptual and affective responses to suffering constitute the attitude toward suffering. Every attitude has at least one perceptual, affective, and action-tending component, but most attitudes have several of these components.

These attitudinal components were gathered from listening to reports of patients about their suffering, from reading the reflections and clarifications of the therapist about a client’s suffering, and from analyzing the literature on suffering by writers, philosophers, theologians, psychiatrists, psychologists, and even by the persons actually experiencing suffering. By categorizing each component, the perceptual, affective, and action-tending components were put together into 11 attitudes toward personal suffering.

Each of the 11 attitudes toward personal suffering will be described in a paragraph of nine statements, three statements about each component of the attitude. Any single statement shows that a person has the attitude, while all nine statements may indicate the attitude of a particular person. Most people are aware that only some of the statements are true of their attitude.

After a description of each of the 11 attitudes, a short paragraph of critique will bring to light in summary form the implications of assuming a particular attitude toward personal suffering.

1. The punitive attitude. When I experience suffering, I realize that God is giving me just punishment for the sins that I have committed in my life. I feel angry with myself for bringing this suffering into my life, and I also experience the same guilt feelings as in the past when things went wrong. I feel envious of other people who are not being singled out to be punished for their sins. When I observe innocent people suffering, I find it hard to believe in a just world. I tend to think that God is unjust because God has afflicted innocent people with suffering. In fact, I judge God to be irresponsible because he does not tell me which sins warrant punishment through suffering.

When the person adopts the punitive attitude, the victim at least triples his or her suffering: the actual suffering, the guilt feelings, the social condemnation. A guilt trip is imposed on the innocent person and on the repentant sinner. God is perceived as unjust and irresponsible.

2. The testing attitude. I am inclined to exclaim, “God is testing my loyalty to him” in sending suffering into my life. Yet I know that afterwards he will